

“You, my friend, are a gaycist”

Gay representations and heteronormativity on the
comedy series *Happy Endings*

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<p>Tiivistelmä – Abstract</p> <p>Viime vuosikymmenien aikana seksuaalivähemmistöjä koskevat puheenaiheet ovat olleet laajasti esillä länsimaisissa medialähteissä. Televisiossa, uutis- ja ajankohtaisohjelmien lisäksi seksuaalivähemmistöt ovat näkyneet myös fiktiivisissä televisio-ohjelmissa. Erityisesti amerikkalaisissa komediasarjoissa esiintyy paljon fiktiivisiä seksuaalivähemmistöjen edustajia. Vaikka kuvaukset vähemmistöihahmoista näissä sarjoissa ovat fiktiivisiä, vaikuttavat ne silti siihen mitä katsojat seksuaalivähemmistöistä ajattelevat. Fiktiivisten representaatioiden laatu on tärkeässä asemassa.</p> <p>Tämä tutkielma käsittelee homorepresentaatioita ja heteronormatiivisuutta amerikkalaisessa komediasarjassa <i>Happy Endings</i>. Tarkastelen kahdeksaa sarjan jaksoa kriittisesti hyödyntäen kriittistä diskurssianalyysia sekä queer teoriaa. Erityisesti kiinnitän huomiota sarjan homoseksuaaliin hahmoon Max Blumiin sekä siihen, miten sarja haastaa ja vahvistaa yhteiskunnan heteronormatiivisuutta. Selvittääkseni tämän, tarkastelun alaisena ovat sarjan huumori, kuvasto sekä positiointi.</p> <p>Tutkimustulokseni paljastivat, että <i>Happy Endings</i> sekä haastoi että vahvisti yhteiskunnan heteronormatiivisia ideologioita. Max Blum esitettiin stereotyyppioista poikkeavana homohahmona ja sarjan huumori muun muassa pilkkasi homostereotyyppijä haastaen näin heteronormatiivista ajattelua. Lisäksi, sarja positioi katsojaa kyseenalaistamaan ja arvioimaan yhteiskunnan muovaamia käsityksiä homoseksuaaleista osoittamalla, että kaikki homoseksuaalit eivät ole keskenään samanlaisia. Sarjassa ilmeneviä heteronormatiivisia diskursseja heikennettiin muuttamalla ne ns. homonormatiiviseksi diskursseiksi. Vaikka tulokseni osoittivat, että <i>Happy Endings</i> haastoi heteronormatiivisuutta monin keinoin, tarve kirvoittaa naurua enimmäkseen heteroseksuaalilta kohdeyleisöltä sai sarjan hyödyntämään myös loukkaavia stereotyyppioita. Heteronormatiivista maailmankatsomusta oli siis vaikea hävittää kokonaan.</p> <p>Tutkielma osoittaa, että media voi myös haastaa tuottamiaan representaatioita ja näin kenties heikentää vallitsevia ideologioita. Seksuaalivähemmistöt ansaitsevat tulla nähdyksi ruudussa moninaisina ihmisinä eivätkä stereotyyppisinä karikatyyreinä.</p>	
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

1	Introduction	1
2	Critical discourse analysis and queer theory with a hint of Will & Grace	2
2.1	Critical discourse analysis	2
2.2	Queer theory	4
2.3	Ghosts of gay characters past	5
2.4	Will & Grace	6
3	Present study	8
3.1	Research questions and aim.....	8
3.2	Data.....	8
3.3	Methods	9
4	Analysis: heteronormativity challenged and enforced	10
4.1	Challenging the heterosexual love story	10
4.2	A gaycist society?.....	13
4.3	The straight factor.....	16
4.4	This is so gay	17
5	Conclusion	19
6	Bibliography	21

1 Introduction

It seems that since the 1990s, minority groups in Western countries have made themselves heard more loudly than ever before – they have also gained more support than ever before. One of these minority groups is the LGBT-community (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender). The community's increasing presence in the media can be argued to be one explanation for the attention the LGBT-community has gained in the last decades.

The double-edged sword of mass media can either maintain or shatter the stereotypical ways which we view people of different sexual identities. It is common for people to rely on television to show them realistic portrayals of the LGBT-community, since for many, television is the main source of information on the matter (Gross 1989; Hart 2000; Raley and Lucas 2006; Linneman 2008). Thus, it is important to view how sexual minorities are depicted on television.

In the late 1990s people in the United States, and later in other western countries as well, gained awareness of members of the LGBT-community more broadly and candidly than before by welcoming such characters as Will Truman and Ellen Morgan to their living rooms on a weekly basis. Television comedies and dramas have given their audiences a chance to get a glance into the world of minority citizens, albeit from the point of view of fictional characters. The portrayals of these fictional characters have varied from tiringly stereotypical to more nuanced LGBT-personalities over the years.

After the long-running NBC situation comedy *Will & Grace* (1998-2006), which portrays the friendship between a gay man and a straight woman, network television sitcoms went through a period without gay characters as series regulars. It was not until 2009 that ABC's successful *Modern Family* (2009–) introduced viewers to a gay couple, Mitchell Pritchett and Cameron Tucker. The characters of Mitch and Cam are well-liked with viewers although they could from time to time be perceived as excessively stereotypical portrayals of gay men, since both of them are depicted as show tune-loving, very effeminate men.

In 2011 another ABC sitcom, *Happy Endings* (2011-2013), introduced a group of friends: a recently broken-up couple Dave and Alex, Alex's older sister Jane and her husband Brad, Penny and, finally, Max. Max Blum is an out-of-work student of life who rarely showers,

cleans or pays rent, and he is also gay. Max is seemingly everything that is not usually associated with a homosexual character which makes him a refreshing take on fictional homosexuals on television.

I see great meaning in how the media represents sexual minorities to viewers, since even a sitcom can have great effect on how we view and think about them. Thus, I am focusing my thesis on gay representation on American situation comedy *Happy Endings* and its character Max Blum. My aim is to find out how the sexuality of Max Blum is presented on *Happy Endings*, drawing on critical discourse analysis and queer theory. I will also investigate the role of heteronormativity in the portrayal of Max and in the series itself.

2 Critical discourse analysis and queer theory with a hint of Will & Grace

In this section I will first introduce the theoretical frameworks which I have chosen for this thesis, critical discourse analysis (CDA) and queer theory (QT). Afterwards, I will present a brief history of gay characters on American television.

CDA is useful in analysing the linguistic aspects of *Happy Endings* as well as investigating how it constructs identities and ideologies. Here, CDA also works hand in hand with the second framework, queer theory, which will be used to analyse the character of Max Blum and view how society's heteronormativity is present on *Happy Endings*. Additionally, I will present the relevant previous research done on gay representations on television programmes, mainly focusing on the representations depicted on NBC's *Will & Grace*.

2.1 Critical discourse analysis

Examining language use is the most powerful tool to reveal the oppression sexual minorities among other minority groups face in our society. Moreover, how language is used in a television series when referring to sexual minorities is also essential, since the media spreads these reflections and ideologies forward for a large audience to encounter.

Critical discourse analysis (CDA), formerly known as critical linguistics, focuses on critically examining social inequities in texts, discourse and language use, to see, for example, how

they are conveyed, indicated and established (Wodak 2001). One aim of CDA is to bring forth its findings on inequalities in language use and call for change on their behalf (Wodak 1999; van Leeuwen 2006). In the words of Fairclough and Wodak (1997:267): “Any discourse has historical roots, has an impact on the present and also determines the future.” Thus, it is important to investigate which sorts of discourses are revealed in a largely spread television series.

CDA relies on three crucial concepts: the concept of power, the concept of history and the concept of ideology (Wodak 2001:3). All of these are present in various types of discourse, and thus CDA is applied to investigate several kinds of topics on various fields (van Leeuwen 2006:291). According to Fairclough and Wodak (1997:275), it is helpful to suppose that all text, whether written or spoken, is composing relations, representations and identities at the same time. Additionally, Fairclough and Wodak (1997:276) maintain that ideology should be considered as a process which combines specific representations of reality and specific identities, particularly those which are formed in social groups and communities. Janks (1997) theorises that ideology is the most powerful when it has become normal and invisible in society. Fairclough (1995: 80) states that, for example, belief systems, social relationships and identities can be constructed simultaneously in texts, and texts can aspire to construct a certain type of reader identity, writer-reader relationship and a certain ideology.

Fairclough (1995:81) theorises that the discourse practice in media discourse functions as a link between the text and the socio cultural practice. This means that new sociocultural practices mould texts by changing the nature of discourse practice – how the text is produced and consumed – which can be seen in the text. In the scope of this thesis it can, for example, be applied this way: LGBT-issues have gained more attention in the society (new sociocultural practice), thus television producers want to add more LGBT-characters into TV programmes (discourse practice), which results in more LGBT-concepts in television series (text).

According to Wodak (1999:186), CDA researchers are expected to incorporate their own beliefs and values into their research, since they have an effect on the work in any case. However, she points out that a detachment from the area of study is also important in order to avoid the research forming into an effort to prove the researcher’s beliefs as true; the data must speak for itself. Moreover, researchers’ aim is not to reveal truths but to suggests

explanations and answers to the issues at hand. Motschenbacher and Segu (2013:528) suggest that critical discourse analysis is particularly well suited for examining the linguistic results of the reigning heterosexual norm as a “power-related, social macro-issue”.

2.2 Queer theory

At the beginning of the 1990s a poststructuralist framework known as queer theory (QT) emerged as literary theorists, film theorists and philosophers pondered about sexuality, identity and gender (Walter 2001; Cameron and Kulick 2003). Queer theory is not actually one single theory *per se*, but a collection of different conceptualizations of sexualities (Cameron and Kulick 2003:55). QT examines how cultural features and discursive actions in societies enforce heterosexuality as the norm – this is called heteronormativity – and questions the whole concept of sexual identities (Nelson 1999; Cameron & Kulick 2003; Motschenbacher & Stegu 2013). In other words, QT challenges the heteronormativity of our language and society. Queer theory views that sexual identities are built around the binary of homo/heterosexuality and are bound for changes (Roseneil 2000; Cameron & Kulick 2003; Walter 2001).

Homosexuals, like any other group, should not be forced into a mold because of their sexuality, but the powerful hand of mass media can do this by showing people in a certain light continuously. Queer theorists state that gender can be “performed” in various ways, and that we display the gender aspects we choose to the world. The aspects we bring forward construct our gender identity and challenge essentialist notions of gender identities (Butler 1999; Gauntlett 2002). In accordance with this, sexual identities are also subjective and performative, and queer theorists support breaking the heteronormative categorizations of society and displaying one’s subjective sexuality (Walters 2001:12660-12661). Thus, from a queer theoretical standpoint, even a character in a television program that battles stereotypicality is a victory.

Queer theory marks culture as an important aspect in comprehending the changing nature of sexuality (Roseneil 2000). Roseneil presents societal aspects, which illustrate the changes in the polarised heterosexual/homosexual binary. According to Roseneil (2000), changes in “heterorelations” are seen everywhere in today’s society, for example, it is common that families and friend circles consist of people who do not qualify as leading traditional heteronormative lives. She further points out that these changes are also visible in popular

culture; particularly television series such as *Friends* that have included queer characters have with their culturally significant position weakened the traditional “heterorelations” of society. Today, over a decade after Roseneil’s article, television programmes continue to portray the lives of LGBT-characters on series such as *Modern Family* and *Happy Endings*, which do, indeed, portray families and groups of friends with minority characters effortlessly. Roseneil also suggests that popular culture has an impact on how people build their relationships and identities in the real world.

In most research conducted in the field of queer theory, the ways of how heteronormativity is maintained and prioritised in societies are brought to the centre (Roseneil 2000). There is no denying that we live in a society that deploys heteronormative concepts in all areas of life, from the way we dress to the cultural products we prefer. However, at least in the Western society, the reigns of heteronormativity have begun to loosen, which can also be viewed from a queer theoretical viewpoint. When applying a queer perspective, one does not simply decide what is “queer” but views matters, for instance, from a non-heteronormative point of view (Motschenbacher & Stegu 2013:520). In my analysis of *Happy Endings* I will attempt to view whether heteronormativity puts restrictions on the representation of Max’s sexuality like it did on the character of Will on *Will & Grace*.

2.3 Ghosts of gay characters past

The portrayals of gay characters on television programmes have increased and developed monumentally over the years. Gay characters first appeared in minimal roles on American television in the wake of the AIDS epidemic in the early 1980s. As the epidemic was perceived as ‘the disease of the gays’, stories involving gay characters were usually AIDS-related and if not, they often dealt with the ‘problem’ fictional gays had, the problem of being gay (Gross 1989: 137-138).

To compare the situation of the 80s to this day, gay depictions in the media have clearly developed for the better, yet several problems are still present. Gross (1989:130) theorised that as long as sexual minorities are perceived as “unnatural” in the society, their depictions continue to be contradictory and carefully executed. Furthermore, mass media seldom changes or develops certain portrayals that are widespread in the society (Gross 1989: 135), causing it to be quite challenging to harness new depictions, particularly on network television. Thus, even though everyone is different, the majority of gay men are still portrayed

as non-masculine, effeminate men on network television (Linneman 2008:584) – with the exception of Max on ABC’s *Happy Endings*, a series that regrettably only lasted for three seasons.

Representations tend to follow the biases and preferences of those who have the most say in what can and cannot be seen in the media – the ones who are in control are most often white, middle-aged, heterosexual men (Gross 1989: 131). Despite the dominance heterosexuals have over the media, sexual minorities still have some say over how they are portrayed in media outlets. GLAAD, formerly known as The Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation, monitors the LGBT community’s presence in the media, particularly on television, daily and reports its findings to the public in its “Where are we on TV Report” which has been published annually since 1995 (GLAAD 2013).

In 1997, GLAAD organized a campaign called “Let Ellen out” in order to shine a light on media’s disinterest in lesbian and gay representations on television (GLAAD 2013). The campaign focused on the Ellen DeGeneres starring comedy series *Ellen*, which had, as a result of GLAAD’s campaign, the only non-heterosexual lead character on American television before *Will & Grace*, although with discouraging results since the series was shortly cancelled. Nevertheless, *Ellen* opened viewers’ eyes to sexual minorities being on television and set a trend for LGBT-themed programming (Becker 2006:185).

2.4 *Will & Grace*

The 20-minute situation comedy *Will & Grace* (NBC 1998-2006) introduces viewers to the lives led by best friends Grace Adler (Debra Messing), a thirty-something interior designer, and Will Truman (Eric McCormack), a successful thirty-something lawyer. Will and Grace seem like the perfect couple, only one that can never have a romantic relationship since Will is gay. Together with their friends Karen Walker (Megan Mullally) and Jack McFarland (Sean Hayes), Will and Grace navigate through life looking for love.

When *Will & Grace* premiered in the television season of 1998-1999, it made history by being the first situation comedy with a homosexual lead character (Hart 2000:59). Will was well-liked with viewers since he was a different kind of gay character from the first, negative stereotype-inducing television gay characters (Battles and Hilton-Morrow 2002:90). He was also the kind of masculine homosexual who could be seen as compromising the ever-reigning

heteronormative ideology (ibid.). The most respectful accomplishment of *Will & Grace* is not any of the awards it has won but the awareness that it gained for the LGBT-community.

However, Battles and Hilton Morrow (2002), Raley and Lucas (2006) and Linneman (2008), among others have conducted research on *Will & Grace* and revealed some negative aspects in the series' gay portrayals. Battles and Hilton-Morrow (2000:101) go as far as declaring *Will & Grace* as a program that enforces heteronormativity despite the fact that it has brought visibility to the gay community. The authors go on to state that *Will & Grace* might even have reinforced homophobia in society since the platonic relationship between Will and Grace can almost be viewed as heterosexual only with the lack of consummation. Will has also been referred to as an asexual, while his gay friend Jack is portrayed as a flashy, casual sex-having stereotypical homosexual (Hart 2000:59).

At the heart of *Will & Grace* is humour, which also contributes to the representations of gay characters Will and Jack. On the series, humour usually ensues when the gay characters are being referred to as feminine either by each other or by other characters. Battles and Hilton-Morrow (2002:89-91) call this 'gender inversion' and claim that the series further enforces it by not creating instances where this heteronormative view of gay men is questioned. They also observed that gender inversion is the program's relied tool when a gay character's sexually must be displayed. In tow with Battles and Hilton-Morrow, Linneman (2008: 584-587) states that referring to gay men as females, and thus weakening their masculinity, is common in American television culture, and while *Will & Grace* depicts different kinds of gay male characters, the characters still remain effeminate. He maintains that the reasons for this are that heterosexual men want to differentiate themselves from homosexual men by effeminising them.

On *Happy Endings*, Max can be viewed as the opposite of an effeminate man; he is almost an "average Joe". This setting turns what is considered as funny on *Will & Grace* on its head, so that the masculinity of Max is what is considered funny on *Happy Endings*. On the surface, there do not seem to be many similarities between the portrayals of gay male characters on *Will & Grace* and *Happy Endings*, except the core relationship between a heterosexual female character and a gay male character who used to be in a romantic relationship; Will and Grace and Max and Penny. Although, Max and Penny's relationship is not shown to be as co-dependent as Will and Grace's relationship, they share a close bond and support each other.

One other crucial point differentiates Max from Will and many other gay characters on television: he is not handsome, muscular or physically fit or wealthy as Battles and Hilton-Morrow (2002) describe most gay characters. His masculinity is not something that is traditionally appealing to females, which in parts can be seen taking gay masculinity to a different level on television.

On *Will & Grace*, both of the main characters often have romantic interests, but only Grace's relationships are presented as physical. According to Battles and Hilton-Morrow (2002:96), Will's relationships are more like 'male bonding' due to the fact that heteronormative society gets in the way of portraying same-sex relationships similarly as heterosexual relationships, namely as physical and loving. The need to play by the rules set by our society's heteronormativity is a pitfall that many network television programmes have to battle.

3 Present study

3.1 Research questions and aim

My aim is to examine how the character of Max Blum is presented in *Happy Endings* and how his character plays into the way the series itself challenges and reinforces society's heteronormativity.

1. How is heteronormativity challenged on *Happy Endings*?
2. How is heteronormativity reinforced on *Happy Endings*?

3.2 Data

The reason I have chosen *Happy Endings* as my data is purely the fascination for the character of Max Blum. He is a funny, layered and nuanced character that is brought to life by Adam Pally. Moreover, Max's biggest character trait is not that he is gay, as was the case with Will on *Will & Grace*, but that he is a very inefficient person. *Happy Endings* was well liked by its viewers since it worked effortlessly as an ensemble comedy and the characters were all multidimensional, particularly the character of Max has gained praise from viewers.

Happy Endings follows the lives of six friends in their thirties in the city of Chicago: Dave (Zachary Knighton), Alex (Elisha Cuthbert), Jane (Eliza Coupe), Brad (Damon Wayans Jr.), Penny (Casey Wilson) and Max (Adam Pally). Dave is all about V-neck shirts and goatees. He owns and operates his own food truck and is in an on-and-off relationship with Alex. Alex is a petit blonde-haired woman who runs her own clothes shop and is a little slow at getting her friends' jokes. Jane, Alex's older sister, is an over-achiever and a very organised person, who stops at nothing to get her way. She is married to Brad. Brad, Jane's husband, is an African American businessman who loves romantic comedies and spoiling his wife. Penny is a hopeless, unlucky-in-love, romantic in search of a perfect man to marry. She was Max's girlfriend in college before he 'came out of the closet'. Max is a lazy slop who is always asking his friends for money, since he is disinterested in keeping his limousine business alive. He loves sports and has no motivation to get his life in order. His romantic relationships are often brief but he is still looking for the perfect man.

In order to answer my research question I have chosen eight episodes of *Happy Endings* for deeper analysis. From season one: 1.02 *The Chicks and girlfriend*; 1.04 *Mein coming out* and 1.06 *Of mice and Jazz-Kwon-Do*. From season two: 2.07 *The Code War* and 2.13 *The St. Valentine's Day Maxssacre*. From season three: 3.09 *Ordinary Extraordinary Love*; 3.15 *The Straight Dope* and 3.17 *Bros Before Bros*. Each episode runs for approximately twenty minutes.

These particular episodes have been chosen because each of them focuses on the character of Max in a meaningful way that will be of great use in answering my research questions. In these episodes, themes, such as Max's stereotype defying identity, coming out to his parents and finding a suitable mate, are explored.

3.3 Methods

In order to see the role society's heteronormativity plays in the series, the humour of the series, its imagery and the way characters and viewers are positioned are under observation. These aspects can be found particularly in storylines that are built around the character of Max. How he acts and how his friends act in these instances are key information for the analysis. The selected episodes will be watched several times in order to gather as much material as is needed for my analysis. Moreover, the most essential parts of dialogue will be transcribed for the analysis section.

Both, CDA and queer theory will be applied while looking into the humour, imagery and positioning on the series in order to find out the underlying ideologies and power relations in the text. According to Janks (1997), text positioning can reveal whose interests are being served by it and what consequences the positioning might have, and, moreover, how does it all relate to power relations. By looking at the visual imagery of the series, the underlying ideologies can be seen more clearly. The same applies to the humour; how homosexuality is used in humour can be very revealing. The ideologies and power relations are used to analyse how heteronormative discourses are challenged and enforced in the series. For the purposes of this study, contesting heteronormativity is seen to take place when traditionally heterosexual notions are replaced with homosexual notions, or if the viewers' heteronormative views are challenged.

4 Analysis: heteronormativity challenged and enforced

In my analysis of eight *Happy Endings* episodes, I found aspects that challenge society's heteronormativity but also points that enforce it. While looking into the humour, imagery and positioning on the series, and applying a critical perspective, I found four different categories. The categories are: 'challenging the heterosexual love story' which depicts how *Happy Endings* contests heterosexual romantic norms; 'a gaycist society?' which shows how gay stereotypes are dealt with in the series; 'the straight factor' which includes how heterosexuals figure into 'gay' storylines and 'this is so gay' which depicts how Max sees himself as a gay man. In the series all characters play into forming the picture of how sexualities are treated but the character of Max is the most essential.

4.1 Challenging the heterosexual love story

On *Happy Endings*, Max's relationships are discussed as much as his friends' and even brought to the centre on several occasions. His relationships are depicted as somewhat physical by showing some kissing and a few suggestive bedroom scenes. The episodes 2.13 *The St. Valentine's Day Maxssacre* (Libman & Libman 2012) and 3.17 *Bros before Bros* (Berger 2013) portrayed Max as a part of romantic storylines. Both episodes depicted homosexual relationships in the place of heterosexual relationships in traditionally heterosexual settings.

In *The St. Valentine's Day Massacre* (Libman & Libman 2013), Max drives his friends around in his limo on Valentine's Day and watches all of their Valentine's plans go sore. When it turns out that one of his paying customers is his former boyfriend Grant, old feelings arise and Max tries to stay unrecognisable. However, this does not work and after Grant gets left by his date, Max makes a bold, romantic gesture and he and Grant embark on a romantic carriage ride that was planned for Brad and Jane while the song "More than Words" plays in the background. The imagery of the scene involved dozens of candles on the porch of Grant's apartment building and a white carriage decorated with red roses being drawn by white horses.



Max (on the left) and Grant on the carriage

In *Bros before Bros* (Berger 2013), Max starts a relationship with Wilson, who unbeknownst to him, is the son of Dave's biggest rival in the food truck business. The situation turns complicated when Max has promised Dave to sabotage his enemy's food truck, and is caught by Wilson doing it. This leads to a Romeo and Juliet-esque scene where Max is under Wilson's balcony asking him to let him up, and the 'forbidden' love affair continues. When Dave becomes frustrated about his feud, he tries to make amends with his rival but is unsuccessful and a food fight with epic battle music begins. The battle is stopped by Max and Wilson's passionate kissing – with clichéd romantic music playing in the background – and Dave and his rival make peace because of the lovers. Even though Max and Wilson's

relationship did not continue in the following episodes, this was a major storyline for the character of Max.



Max under Wilson's balcony

These sorts of romantic narratives are usually seen as 'heteronormative discourses' (Dalley and Cambell 2006:13) and played out with heterosexual characters. In this case, however, the traditionally heterosexual settings have been lifted from their heteronormative contexts and transported into a suitable context for homosexual couples as well. Thus, the storylines can be seen to contesting heteronormativity by taking narratives that are usually thought as heteronormative and making them 'homonormative' instead. Furthermore, the audience is positioned to view the homosexual couples as a part of everyday society, who also have romance in their lives. This is not usually shown on television (Walters 2001, in Shugart 2003:69). The traditionally romantic imagery does not only belong to heterosexual couples and the series is bringing it forward. In terms of humour, the homosexual couples are also used to mock the heterosexual romantic clichés. Janks (1997:341) states that by creating new discourses, people are offered to see the world differently through them, and, here, one new discourse has been created.

4.2 *A gaycist society?*

On American comedy series, gay men are typically portrayed as behaving in certain way and liking certain things which have in time formed into stereotypes. In several *Happy Endings* episodes, it is made clear that Max is not the stereotypical gay man. He is sloppy, unfit and lazy and nothing like the gay characters in *Modern Family* or *Will & Grace*, for example. The only effeminate gay character on *Happy Endings* is the recurring character Derrick but also both heterosexual male characters, Brad and Dave, are portrayed as being effeminate from time to time by having interests that can be seen as feminine. Additionally, Penny and Alex are mentioned sometimes behaving ‘more gay’ than Max.

Battles and Hilton-Morrow (2002) theorise that the effeminate, flamboyant gay character is brought along as a ‘foil’ to the more masculine gay character in order to make him more acceptable for the heterosexual audience. However, this only one perspective from which one can look at the issue; on *Happy Endings*, Derrick is brought in to be contrasted with Max but his purpose could also be seen as illustrating how different these two people are.

In the second episode of the series *The Chicks and Girlfriend* (Bycel 2011) Penny wants a real ‘gay husband’ since Max is not a suitable one. In this instance, by ‘gay husband’ Penny refers to a gay man, who gossips and goes to brunch and to farmer’s market with her, essentially what is considered as an effeminate man. Thus, Max finds her a suitable candidate, Derrick.

Max:	Gay enough for you Penny?
Derrick:	Slut, come help me out of this split!
Penny:	He’s the gay of my dreams!

This setting mocks the heterosexual female and her gay husband -setting that is in the centre of *Will & Grace*. The ‘gay enough’ comment from Max suggests that the flamboyant Derrick has more ‘gayness’ in him than Max does and is, therefore, a better gay individual.

Additionally, Penny’s comment that Derrick is ‘the gay’ of her dreams alludes to the romantic expression of finding ‘the man’ or ‘the woman’ of one’s dreams. It is questionable why all gay people would need to be put in the same category and be treated like a different gender. Thus, it would appear that this reinforces heteronormativity by bringing up the ideology that

homosexuals are a hybrid-gender, rather than men. According to Schneider (1997, in Dalley & Cambell 2006,18) homosexuals are seen as breaking and challenging gender-roles and acting as a threat to heterosexual men.

- Penny: I thought that I wanted this offensively stereotypical gay guy but it's too much. I mean, it's like it messes with the group dynamic.
- Max: It does Pen, because our group already has an offensively stereotypical gay guy.
(Insert to Penny acting like Derrick)
- Max: You don't need a gay husband cause you're *my* gay husband.

However, a more important point of the episode is that Penny, herself, is flashy, over-the-top and very similar to Derrick. She does not need a gay husband because she is the gay husband of Max. Another point of the episode is that homosexuals are not all alike, even though American television has often made it seem so by first introducing all gay characters as AIDS-stricken and later as flamboyant men who all have a female best friend. The portrayals of the past have become stereotypes that are hard to erase and that is how 'the offensively stereotypical gay guy', a phrase that was used several times in this episode, has probably come to be. Moreover, by mentioning 'the offensively stereotypical gay guy' many times and using the words 'offensively' and 'stereotypical' that induce negative connotations, the viewer is positioned as perceiving stereotypes offensive and perhaps encouraged to think about their own notions of homosexuals.

In 3.15 *The Straight Dope* (Zimmet & Rubin 2013), Penny and Brad conspire to reveal to the girl Max is seeing for her basketball tickets that he is gay. They come to the conclusion that the only 'gay' thing that Max does is having sex with men.

- Brad: Let's use the gay things that Max does to trap him and force him to out himself.
- Penny: All right. What are the gay things that Max does?
- Brad: Hmm, uuh, doesn't he spend hundreds of dollars on lotions and creams? No, that's me.
- Penny: Uu, what about the binder that he has full of pictures of men's goatees?

- Brad: That's Dave. But he does have that giant collection of gay porn.
- Penny: Weirdly, that's Alex. And every time I ask her why, she says "hey, I don't smoke but I have ashtrays".
- Brad: I'm starting to think that Max is the least gay of all of us. What a fresh character.
- Penny: Except for the one really gay thing he does.
- Brad: Sex with men?
- Penny: That's exactly what I was referring to!

Here, the series is positioning the viewer as someone who thinks that homosexuals like certain things or act in a certain way. Brad's words 'least gay' remark just this and pave way to the thought that the aspect of sexuality has disappeared in the media behind the stereotypical notions. Even Brad questions whether 'sex with men' is what Penny actually meant, which is ironic. Moreover, if Brad, Dave and Alex can do 'gay things' such as buy creams and lotions, collect men's goatees and own gay porn, respectively, why are homosexuals not allowed similar liberties to do things that are not in accordance with their sexuality? By positioning the viewer this way, the series challenges the stereotypical thoughts about sexual minorities that lie in the core of the heteronormative worldview.

In 1.04 *Mein Coming Out* (Lerner 2011), Max has told his parents that Dave is gay to cover for himself in his youth. Dave is perplexed as he does not understand how Max's parents could believe it. He tries to convince them otherwise but, for instance, his drink preference and dressing style make it difficult.

- Max's mom: One day you'll meet your knight in shining armour, Dave.
- Dave: No, I won't because I'm not gay!
- Waiter: (addresses Dave) Two scotches and here's your daiquiri.
- Dave: Seriously, that's your timing!?

This points to enforcing heteronormativity, instead of challenging it, for the purposes of humour. Max's parents do not believe Dave's words but use his drink preference as proof of what they believe. Dave acknowledges it and does not see a reason to defend his case after his drink order arrives. It is as if daiquiris are labelled as drinks that either women or

homosexuals order, and Dave ordering it automatically points to him being gay. This is, again, part of the heteronormative ideology, which determines that heterosexuals and homosexuals prefer certain things. Thus, it would appear that gay stereotypes are a source of laughter on *Happy Endings*, although, mostly in situations that involve heterosexual men since Max is contrasted with gay stereotypes. Nevertheless, in this instance, heteronormativity can be viewed to be enforced.

As is evident on several occasions, *Happy Endings* brings forth and mostly challenges the ideology that gays are essentially thought as being all alike. In episode 1.06 *Of Mice and Jazz-Kwon-Do* (Kerkovich & Waldman 2011), Max accuses Brad of being ‘a gaycist’, since he tried to set Max up with his co-worker only because they are both gay. Even though the term ‘gaycist’ is only known in the Urban Dictionary, does not mean that it is not a sensible term. The stereotypes surrounding homosexuals are widespread and people living in the heteronormative society are prone to succumb to them. Based on *Happy Endings*, being a gaycist is not the same as being a homophobe; a gaycist does not question stereotypes and thinks that all gays are essentially the same. A gaycist is being discriminative without knowing it; a gaycist is a product of the heteronormative society.

4.3 The straight factor

On *Happy Endings*, like on many American sitcoms, the presence of heterosexual characters is much bigger than sexual minority characters. A decade ago, homosexual characters were used to bring awareness to heterosexual characters (Walters 2001, in Shugart 2003:29). Today, this is sadly no different. In *Of Mice and Jazz-Kwon-Do* (Kerkovich & Waldman 2011), for example, Max teaches Brad that not all gay people are interested in each other just because they share a sexual preference.

Walters (2001, in Shugart 2003: 69) notes that gay characters are put in a group of heterosexual characters in order to ‘legitimise homosexuality through assimilation’. This is also the case on *Happy Endings*. The heterosexual characters act as a ‘bumper’ for heterosexual viewers and are thus positioned as people who do not know everything about homosexuals. In 3.09 *Ordinary Extraordinary Love* (Chun 2013) Max has an identity crisis because he does not know which gay sub-category he belongs to. With the help of Derrick and Jane, Max familiarises himself with different groups but ultimately he has to come up with a category just for him. Through this storyline, Jane and other Max’s straight friends are

very interested in delving into gay culture. By presenting aspects of gay culture, although its accuracy is under question, heteronormativity is challenged because the audience is once again positioned to review their knowledge of gay people.

Several scholars (eg. Battles & Hilton-Morrow 2002; Shugart 2003) have noted that gay males on television programmes are made more acceptable to viewers by putting them in close relationships with women and alluding to a potential heterosexual relationship. This also enforces heteronormative thinking. Most visibly, this has happened on *Will & Grace*. On *Happy Endings*, the character of Max is close with his heterosexual female friends, particularly Penny whom he dated before coming out. However, the relationship between Max and Penny is depicted as purely platonic without yearning for each other.

Shugart (2003) states that heterosexual women on television programmes and movies are made 'available' for gay men to keep the dream of a romantic heterosexual relationship between them alive. On *Happy Endings*, Max is seen kissing Jane and Alex in different episodes, but it is made clear that the kisses are platonic and serve a purpose. In 2.07 *The Code War* (Bycel 2011), when Max kisses Alex to prove a point to Dave, who is about to date Max's former girlfriend, Alex develops a crush on Max who is oblivious to her seduction. While in 3.17 *The Straight Dope* (Zimmet & Rubin 2013), Max pretends to be in a heterosexual relationship with a girl who gets free tickets to sport games and concerts. However, he does not do anything physical with her apart from 'fore kissing' which is kissing and caressing the air around each other's faces. Max's light aversion with female body parts is made clear through the series by having Max bringing them out explicitly when he pretends to be straight, which is also a source of humour. Thus, on *Happy Endings*, even though women are made 'available' to Max, it seems to be purely for the purposes of humour. Max has no interest in women because he is gay, and the viewers are not expected to perceive him otherwise. This is breaking the old pattern of keeping the dream of romantic heterosexual relationship between a gay man and a straight woman alive and, therefore, challenging heteronormativity.

4.4 This is so gay

The fourth episode of the series, *Mein Coming Out* (Lerner 2011), centres around Max and his finally coming out to his parents. For years Max has used Penny as his fake girlfriend but when Penny is unable to come to dinner with Max and his parents, his friends question why

Max does not just tell his parents he is gay. Max reasons that his parents would only try to find him a Jewish boyfriend and he thinks coming out is ‘so gay’. Nevertheless, he sets out to tell his parents with the support of Dave only to be interrupted by Jane who has decided that if Max is not ready to come out, he should not be pressured into it. However, as Max’s parents did not like Jane, Max plans for Alex to come to the second dinner with his parents as his girlfriend. Eventually, at dinner with his parents, along with Dave, Max decides to come out to his parents after determined Jane, jealous Brad, late-arriving Alex and weirdly acting Penny interrupt the dinner with their antics.

Max’s dad: Two sluts and a nazi? What are you into Max?
 Max: Aah, dudes. (Pause)
 I’m into guys.
 M’s mom & dad: What did he say?
 Max: I’m gay.
 (Pause)
 Max’s mom: You-you’re gay?
 Max dad: Ooh
 Max: I am. I wanted to tell you sooner... I just... didn’t know how you were gonna react. I was scared.
 Max dad: So, you’re not dating any of these women?
 Max: I’m not.
 Max’s dad: Thank god! Max’s mom: What a relief!
 Max: What? You’re not upset?
 Max’s mom: Sweetheart, you don’t ever have to be scared to tell us anything. What matters to us is that you’re happy. And that you’re surrounded by people who love you.

 Max’s dad: (opens his arms) Come here.
 Max: (hugging his parents) Told you coming out would be gay.

By calling coming out ‘gay’, Max distances himself from it. He makes it seem like he does not want to be affiliated with anything that can be considered as gay. When he does come out, he still considers it as gay but it is unclear why. Nevertheless, Max tries to distance himself from everything that is traditionally considered as gay by the heteronormative society, but ends up coming out after all since his sexuality is a part of himself, even if he does not like

the notions surrounding it and even if they are not accurate on his account. This is Max coming to terms with what is considered 'gay' and which parts of it apply to him, he is figuring out his subjective sexuality (Walters 2001).

This instance can be viewed to either challenge or enforce heteronormativity. On one hand, it can be seen to challenge heteronormativity because Max's coming out to his parents is an honest, difficult conversation like many have to have with their parents. On the other hand, calling things 'gay' and thus distancing himself from that, Max positions himself as a part of the heteronormative society which sees things as 'gay'. Different texts privilege different discourses (Janks 1997, 340), and on *Happy Endings*, as on many American sitcoms, heteronormative discourses are nearly always present even though they are challenged from time to time.

5 Conclusion

Happy Endings proves that fun, homosexual characters can be created differently, because not all gays are alike, and it is tiring to pretend that they are. The character of Max was based on a gay friend of the series creator David Caspe (Hartinger 2011). The series challenges heteronormative ideologies by positioning viewers to think about their notions of homosexuals, poking fun at heteronormative discourses and turning heteronormative discourses into homonormative. Additionally, the term 'gaycist' offers much to think about.

The humour of the series also pokes fun at gay stereotypes by contrasting them with the seemingly anti-gay homosexual, Max. Moreover, the series breaks patterns involving gay men that were created by past television comedies and films. Yet, heteronormative discourses are hard to escape, and the need to achieve laughs from the mostly heterosexual audience at times enforces heteronormativity by surrendering to stereotypes.

Previous studies have shown that American comedy series involving gay male characters are constructed as it is suitable for the heteronormative society, asexual and effeminate. Battles and Hilton-Morrow (2002) among others thought that *Will & Grace* enforced homophobic attitudes rather than challenged them. The series was also making gay characters either feminine or masculine in the ways that are considered desirable for women. The basic heteronormative ideologies were not challenged as they were on *Happy Endings*.

This study demonstrated that heteronormativity can be challenged on American television comedy by clever writing but also that it continues to surrender to the mainstream notions of homosexuality and poke fun at the expense of those notions. Sadly, these notions have been around for a long time, and erasing them completely is nearly impossible. However, heteronormative discourses are bound to weaken if they are boldly challenged, and television is a good tool for that purpose.

This study was done on a series that only lasted for three seasons, even though, today, when only a handful of American sitcoms get a second season order, it can be considered as a moderately long series. There are, however, many promising programmes where heteronormativity can be observed in the future, for example, Fox's *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* and on cable, where restrictions are non-existent, HBO's *Looking*. The characters on *Looking* are all homosexual men; therefore, it would be interesting to examine heteronormativity in a series where the 'bumper' of heterosexual characters for heterosexual viewers does not exist. On network programmes, a comparative study of two or more sitcoms, where different gay characters are present, could be an interesting way to determine the differences and similarities between television's gay characters. The evolution of gay characters could also be examined to make out certain trends in the depictions and try to determine what things have brought them about.

It is important that people get to see different portrayals of homosexual characters, since American television spreads far and influences many, particularly young people. Sexual minorities deserve to be depicted as they are and not as offensively stereotypical on every other comedy series. Exposure is good, but bad exposure is not.

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